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The Political Regard in Medieval Islamic Thought

Negin Yavari*

Abstract: »Der politische Aspekt im Islamischen Denken des Mittelalters«. Global intellectual history has attracted traction in the past decade, but the field remains focused on the modern period and the diffusion of Western political concepts, ideologies, and methodologies. This paper suggests that juxtaposing political texts from the medieval Islamic world with their Christian counterparts will allow for a better understanding of the contours of the debate on the space for politics, framed in primary sources as the perennial tug of war between religious and lay authority. The implications of this line of inquiry for the history of European political thought are significant as well. Many of the premises and characteristics that are considered singularly European, such as continuity between past and present, as well as a strong performative regard to political thought, are equally present in non-European (in this instance Islamic) debates. It is more a matter of perspective than essence that distinguishes the history of European political thought, and a wider perspective through juxtaposition of texts and concepts would enhance the global debate by introducing new questions from rarely visited quarters.

Keywords: Al-Ghazali, Ockham, Islamic political thought, common good, Secularity, global political thought, comparative political thought, Presentism.

A simple query frames the present inquiry: Is the history of political thought in a non-Western context possible? In spite of the great methodological strides in intellectual history since its emergence from the doldrums in the last decades of the twentieth century, the sub-discipline has remained stubbornly impervious to non-Western thought. Much of this is by design. Intellectual history is engaged, as Anthony Grafton has pointed out, in a search for the origins of modern political thought which is premised upon a past that diverges from the present (Grafton 2006, 1-32). Tracing the roots of a modern world that is thought to be an improvement on its past creates continuity between past and present. The recovery of the republican or neo-Roman concept of liberty at the heart of Machiavelli's ideological universe by Quentin Skinner, for example, changed the terms of the debate on the origins of modern political thought in the Western academy. That paradigm of recovery, however, implies, as hinted above, a

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Whiggish narrative of incremental improvement and progress. For the term “origins” does not simply imply a beginning, albeit elusive, but as observed by Marc Bloch, it carries with it a host of implicit explanations to buttress value judgments (Bloch 1953, 29-35). In more ways than one, historians are also the begetters, or rather the forgers, of intellectual history.

On those and similar grounds, many a practitioner of intellectual history has argued against comparisons with non-Western histories of thought, or comparisons that predate a globalized world. Popular justifications for cordoning off the modern West from the rest of history include the fact that state and society were not differentiated in the medieval period, that manners and modes of exchange or cross-pollination prior to the age of steam and print remain unrecoverable, and that attempts at cross-cultural engagement were few and far between and their retrieval now induces anachronistic assumptions. Samuel Moyn, for example, insists on modern and capitalist social formations for the spread of “concept global” (Moyn 2013, 187-204) and, in the case of a concept generated in non-Western societies, Andrew Sartori argues that “it would need to be fully intelligible within the European intellectual context” (Sartori 2010, 322). Global intellectual history for Sartori and others is predicated upon translatability, or the potential to formulate a political claim that, explicitly or not, reflects, illuminates, and addresses that which is already in existence.¹

All this tends to suggest that a political claim considered worthy of its name is bound by European articulations of the political and that, from a wider perspective, histories of political thought are themselves part of the arsenal of modern imperialism (Bell 2013, 537-40); or in the words of John Dunn, “the study of political thought remains intractably historical” (Dunn 1996, 13). And Jeremy Adelman has pointed out global history’s lackluster engagement with disjuncture, disintegration, and dissonance – all critical components of deep histories of global transformation (Adelman 2017). To Adelman, global history has actually contributed to “the Anglicizing of intellectual lives around the world” as “English has become Globish,” the tongue of globalization.

There is another valence to the predatory nature of global history that deserves our attention. In the same way that conceptions of secularism remain heavily vested in Christian discursive, infrastructural, and historical templates, no matter the numerous refutations, the linear trajectory of progress that underwrites European/Western exceptionalism remains firmly embedded in historiographical paradigms and periodization schemes that govern writings on the past. What happens if we turn our attention away from the eighteenth century and from Europe, and from the emergence of strong secular states that divided the public and private spheres, and finally, from religion brushed aside, to societies where a new set of values with long roots did not supplant the past?

¹ For arguments to the contrary, see Denecke 2013; Subrahmanyam 2015, 126-37; and Holmes and Standen 2015, 106-17.

Are these societies condemned to a verdict of perpetual senescence? And, is it possible to read texts for context, or as a window into a worldview, if the values adumbrated in those texts do not take hold in society, or to study those that produce political communities that are radically different from the ones that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Is theirs a fundamentally different regime of historicity, to borrow François Hartog's paradigm? Is it possible to rescue the non-Western past from its present status as reified heritage (Hartog 2005, 7-18)?

While the language of politics in medieval Christian thought remains directly comparable with that produced in the Islamic world, as I hope to demonstrate, no ready comparison is allowed – on the historical or historiographical register – between modern Europe and the modern Middle East. But if it can be demonstrated that concurrent but non-synchronous discursive pasts have produced different presents, then how may continuity between past and present – the pride and joy of European intellectual history – be maintained? If intellectual historians concur that ideas must be considered in context, or that there is a 'proper fit' between an idea and its age, then how may we account for similar ideas in different historical contexts?

In what follows, I argue that juxtaposing political texts from the medieval Islamic world with their Christian counterparts will allow for a better understanding of the contours of the debate on the space for politics that Larry Scanlon has called quasi-secularity (Scanlon 1994, 322),² framed in medieval sources as the perennial tug of war between religious and lay authority. The comparative lens will bring into question the long-held belief that if the delineation of that relationship (between secular and religious authority) is markedly different in the modern progeny of the Christian world, i.e., the West, from the one in place in some regions of the Islamic world, it is because of a series of sharp differences in the debates in their past incarnations. Such comparisons will also put a spotlight on present-day organizations of politics – and regimes of historicity – that inform the study of past political thought. The implications of this line of inquiry for the history of European political thought are significant as well.

To a good number of intellectual historians, a proper comparative approach to political thought is bound to be a study in difference. Andrew March, for example, argues that comparative political theory

needs to explain why it is not merely expanding the canon to include non-Western texts and why a certain non-Western text is 'alien,' thus justifying the moniker comparative. (March 2006, 531)

² It deserves mention that implicit in Scanlon's quasi-secularity is a normative definition of secularity as a harbinger of better things to come; see also Newman 2013; Strohm 2010.

The contribution of a Muslim theorist to political thought is not sufficient to qualify the enterprise as “comparative,” for it is no different than proclamations by a Norwegian or a Buddhist, or even a Marxist thinker on the subject. March sets out ten theses to conclude that comparative political theory must be engaged, that is, it must study “the contestations of norms, values, and principles between distinct and coherent doctrines of thought.” In his words,

a genuinely comparative political theory (as opposed to a better political theory or a better universalism) must have a conception of what makes a tradition distinct from another (a role, I argue, that is best filled by religion). (ibid., 564)

There are, of course, vast differences between the worlds of Christianity and Islam in the Age of Global Intensification, to use Robert Moore’s helpful label for the period from 500 to 1500 (Moore 2016, 80-92).³ But can a comparative inquiry that focuses on difference produce new knowledge, or generate fresh approaches? Or will the results infallibly reiterate the stale claim of an apparent divergence – at some indeterminate point in the Middle Ages, and for reasons that remain opaque, between Europe and the rest of the world? Built on the method that Wiebke Denecke has called “ellipsis,” such studies engage in what is a necessarily futile interrogation of one culture for lacking things commonly found in another (Denecke 2013, 12-5).

By way of an example, consider a recent article by three political scientists at Stanford: Lisa Blaydes, Justin Grimmer, and Alison McQueen, where they have subjected several Christian and Islamic mirrors for princes to automated text analysis in order to shed light on the issue of “speaking truth to power” (Blaydes, Grimmer, and McQueen 2013). The authors find that as early as the ninth century, and as feudalism took hold in Europe, Christian mirrors displayed a more explicit political language. In the Islamic world, by contrast, what they call “Mamlukism,” by which they mean the use of military slaves imported from non-Muslim lands, undermined genuine political critique. Feudalism is problematic enough as a moniker with no fixed meaning (Wickham 1985, 166-96) and, as Chris Wickham demonstrated more than three decades ago, it was by no means a stranger to medieval Islamic economies. “Mamlukism” surely holds little analytical promise if it is used as a blanket term to describe political and social orders in effect throughout the Islamic world from the ninth century onwards. Even less so if we consider that the ruling houses that arose from among these military slaves reigned over the Islamic world for a good millennium after the ninth century.⁴ Finally, even as a paradigm for

³ I am also mindful here of Timothy Reuter’s critical conundrum: “Do we compare societies at the same point of time, or at the same stage of development?” See Reuter 1998, 41; and Osterhammel 2011, xv-xxii, 45-76.

⁴ The legal status of military slaves in medieval Islamic polities is by no means a settled matter, especially in the light of their swift and pervasive rise to political power; for examples

characterizing the history of Egypt and Syria in the fifteenth century, “Mamlukism” has long been discarded. The approach merely resuscitates the tired claim that sharp divisions separate the contemporary Western and Islamic worlds in spite of the latter’s fecund past.

Similarly, the emphasis on difference and absence pervades Eduardo Manzano’s study that points to the different processes of institutionalization that prevailed in the medieval Christian and Islamic worlds. Institutions are important, Manzano writes, because they are engines of growth and key to the economic and social transformations of Europe in the fourteenth century. They are different in the Islamic world, we are told,

because of the separation between power and authority that emerged at an early and critical stage in the Islamic polity; and, the distinctive notion of community that emerged as a result of this and helped to shape the self-definition of Muslim societies and the making of the social regularities that performed processes of institutionalization in early Islam. (Manzano 2015, 127)

While medieval Europe produced institutions that combined varying degrees of power and authority notwithstanding their character or origins – institutions that arose in the Islamic world lacked authority as it was consistently denied to them by holders of legitimacy; that is, the clerics. Manzano’s thesis – that strong states grew to dominate the Christian lands whereas states in the Islamic world remained weak as religion successfully monopolized the traffic in authority – has been the mantra of academic scholarship on the Islamic world for almost a century.

By way of contrast, consider here an argument for political change in the relation between court and church as reflected in political tracts from fifteenth-century England. Strohm has demonstrated that manipulations of pictorial and textual representations of the wheel of fortune in Lydgate’s (d. ca. 1451) *Fall of Princes*, his rendition of *De casibus virorum illustrium*, points to the gradual ascendancy of the king over fortune and religious authority a good number of decades before Machiavelli’s (d. 1527) *The Prince*. Lydgate’s opening depicts an illustration of Edward IV (r. 1461-83, with a brief interlude in 1470-1) riding the wheel of fortune, from which his Lancastrian predecessors are tumbling, and the wheel itself flanked by the clerical hierarchy on the one hand and the nobility on the other. The “image of Reason on public view and arrayed in the robes of an English judge accents a new and more general role of Reason as an arbiter of secular conduct,” according to Strohm. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he argues, “Fortune is detached from its reliance upon God’s Providence,” and it is treated as “an autonomous locus of the unpredictability in human affairs, and thus an apt incentive to human precaution” (Strohm 2005,

of the conflicting views, none of which are accounted for in Blaydes, Grimmer, and McQueen’s essay, see De La Vaissière 2007, 7-14, 167-236; Van Steenbergen, Wing, and D’hulster 2016; Paul 1994, 4-5; and Amitai 2007.

114-5). According to Strohm, the idea that fortune might be mastered opened a space for the secular practice of statecraft as a product of human exertion. In this new climate, “reason is not implementing the process, or even just overseeing it, but intervening in a new and unprecedented way, by ‘spiking’ the wheel to arrest its course” (ibid.). It is the dawn of a new era.

Turning from fifteenth-century England to the last decade of the eleventh century in Iran, the vizier Nizam al-Mulk’s (d. 1092) widely read and influential *Siyar al-muluk* (“*The Way of Kings*”) is strikingly similar in political language to Strohm’s mirrors and predates them by almost four centuries. A celebrated vizier and a stalwart figure of power and authority in medieval Islamic society, Nizam al-Mulk dominated the Saljuq Empire (1040-1194) in its heydays in the eleventh century. Such was his standing among the great and the good of his era that his name was put forward as an apt replacement for the ‘Abbasid caliph himself, by no less an authoritative figure than the celebrated theologian and jurist, the Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (d. 1085) (al-Juwayni 1979, 246-55, Heck 2012). In his chapter “On the Turn of Fortune’s Wheel and in praise of the Master of the World – May God Confirm His Sovereignty,” the turning of the wheel of fortune and kingship enjoy a direct and unmediated relationship:

God chooses in every age and in every time, one member of the human race, and having endowed him with the interests of the world and the well-being of His servants; He charges that person to close the doors of corruption, confusion and discord, and He imparts to him such majesty and dignity in the eyes and hearts of men, that under his just rule they may live their lives in constant security and every wish for his reign to continue. (Nizam al-Mulk 1978, 11)

God’s punishment for disobedience or disregard for divine law (presumably by His subjects, including the king) is the disappearance of kingship altogether, and the inauguration of civil strife and destruction. A new king then comes about:

by divine decree one human being acquires prosperity and power, and according to his deserts The Truth bestows good fortune upon him and gives him wit and wisdom, wherewith he may employ his subordinates and every one according to his merits and confer upon each a dignity and a station proportionate to his power. (Nizam al-Mulk 1978, 11)

While the selection of the king is a divine prerogative, it is the wisdom of the king that employs good counsel and protects it, for good rule is also contingent on advice purveyed by others.

The claim here is not that Nizam al-Mulk pre-empted Lydgate and arrived way ahead at an imaginary finishing line; or that there is a connection, however tenuous, between European and Islamic political thought in the premodern period. Rather, the imperative in comparisons drawn between historically non-related cultures is to move beyond “the comfort zone of influence, travel, migration and diffusion,” because, as Denecke has pointed out, textual traditions

“do not travel like guns, germs and steel; not even like coins, miniature paintings, or religious statuettes” (Denecke 2013, 292). What is meant is that juxtaposing the eleventh-century vizier with the fifteenth-century poet forces a reconsideration of the linear relationship between discourse and history that is often considered an exclusive prerogative of European historiography and, by extension, history *tout court*. If mastery of fortune may be read as proof of incipient secularity, then what the comparative frame yields is the inescapable truth – evidenced in subsequent history – that secular political language acts upon the political sphere differently in differing contexts. And secondly, the comparative frame underscores Peter Gordon’s exhortation that “it is time to discount the epistemological and normative (and implicitly metaphysical) premise that ideas are properly understood only if they are studied within the context of their initial articulation” (Gordon 2014, 36-7). For implicit in this idea of initial context, Gordon argues, is the conviction that it is “not merely different than but in fact authoritative over and against all later manifestations or deployments of an idea” (ibid.). Nizam al-Mulk’s irrefutably earlier although most probably not initial articulation of mastery of the wheel of fortune demonstrates that in at least one important regard – the relationship between political rule and divine will – the discursive spheres of premodern England and Iran overlap. That coincidence necessitates an argument for multiple contexts, as opposed to one native context in which an idea, principle, or ideology may be understood.

The same line of inquiry opens the discussion by another bureaucrat-turned-historian, the anonymous (conventionally referred to as Ibn al-Balkhi) late eleventh-century author of *Farsnama* (Book of Fars). His is a history of Fars, the initial homeland of the Sasanians (224-650), Iran’s last pre-Islamic ruling house. Written around the time of Nizam al-Mulk’s death, *Farsnama* begins with:

When God chooses from among his servants a noble person and places in his grasp the reins of kingship and sovereignty and gives to him the dominion and protection of the world, the greatest favor which He can show towards that king in particular and the world in general is to incline the aspirations of the king of the time towards knowledge and justice, because all virtues are contained in these two excellent qualities. (Ibn al-Balkhi 1921, 1)

In this instance, the cornerstone of the king’s sovereignty comprises two God-given, secular qualities. And God’s sovereignty in this passage is legal fiction, for while the selection of the king can be conceived as strictly a divine prerogative, the craft of ruling is an entirely human affair. In medieval Islamic political language, although good kings are considered *ipso facto* pious, their success in this world is measured not by their piety but by their ability to rule with wisdom and discernment. Their demise is brought about by bad judgment and not by fortune.

The sovereignty of God in the political realm was effectively articulated in a similarly fictive manner in the medieval Christian world. There, the divine will of God, which worked in His service and at His bidding, provided the foundation for political legitimacy. But that un-historical and extra-temporal dimension, although in theory the origin of government, “provided medieval kings with few guides to action and little in the way of explicit programs of political policy” (Spiegel 1975, 315), as Gabrielle Spiegel has shown. Rule by the Grace of God, *gratia Dei rex*, was regularly complemented with norms and policies set by kings of the past, which allowed kings to justify their rule.

An identical use of the past is paraded in the court historian Abu al-Fadl Bayhaqi’s celebrated early eleventh-century opus, where kingship and religion are thusly separated:

Know that God Most High has given one power to the prophets, may God’s blessings be upon all of them, and another power to kings. He has made it incumbent upon the creatures on the face of the earth that they should follow those two powers and through them recognise that divinely-given straight path [...] The power specific to the Prophets lies in their evidentiary miracles, that is things that ordinary people are incapable of doing. The power of monarchs comprises a discriminating intellect, military might, conquests and victory over enemies, together with the justice which they dispense in conformity with the commands of God Most High. For the distinction between divinely-assisted and successful monarchs and a tyrannical rebel is that, since monarchs are characterised by the dispensing of justice, good actions, good behaviour and praiseworthy deeds, they should be obeyed [and acknowledged as chosen by God for their task]. Usurpers who practise oppression and evil must be stigmatised as rebels, and holy war (*jehād*) must be waged on them. This is a measure by which those who do good and those who do evil are assessed and show their true nature. One can know by necessity which of those two persons one must obey. In regard to our monarchs (may God be merciful to those who have passed away and give long life to those who are still living!), one must observe how they have led their lives in the past and how they live at present—their justice, beneficent behaviour, pious restraint, religious zeal, purity of daily existence, their pacification of persons and lands, and their cutting short the hands of tyrants and oppressors—so that one becomes assured that they are among the chosen ones of the Creator, His mightiness be exalted and His name sanctified, and that obedience to them has been a divinely-imposed duty and continues to be so. (Beyhaqī 2011, 182-3)

Bayhaqi’s carefully worded exhortation encourages men to follow the two powers and through them recognize the divinely ordained straight path, the *shari’a*. He points as well to the potent practical regard of historical writing, for one must learn about kings of the past to learn to distinguish the monarch from the tyrant. Reason, Bayhaqi writes, will prevent men from being misled by falsehood.

While the divorcing of politics from fortune heralds the dawn of a new era in Lydgate’s England, and the onset of the rule of reason, no similar transformation has been recognized in modern accounts of medieval Islamic political

thought, or even politics. There, the twining of religion and state is upheld as a salient theme of medieval Islamic politics, inherited from pre-Islamic Iran (Grignaschi 1966, 49), and in full force throughout a millennium. In effect, the twining of religion and politics is read to explain the failure of the Islamic world to mirror its Western neighbors and construct a modern political framework, replacing religious norms with liberal values – an almost complete inversion of Scanlon’s quasi-secularity.

In medieval Islamic political language, the twinning of kingship and religion is a strategy of domestication (Yavari 2014, 81-94). By granting to the precept deep historical roots as a pre-Islamic Iranian ideal, medieval theorists sought less to justify the dominion of religion over politics than the very opposite. In modern studies, that attribution has been taken at face value. But there is very little that is exclusively or essentially Persian or Zoroastrian about the twinning of religion and state. The dictum is found in abundance in political writings from across the globe, as we shall see in several examples below. Moreover, there is nothing about it that can be contextualized to the reign of a specific Sasanian dynast. Finally, idealized representations of alien cultures were commonplace in antique historiography. Arnaldo Momigliano has pointed to the imaginary aspect of Persian representations in Greek writings of the period.

The name of Zoroaster, like that of Hermes, became the centre of attraction for any sort of speculation which had something to do with astrology, the after-life and more generally the mysteries of nature. (Momigliano 1978, 145)

In truth, there is a lot more politics embedded in this axiom than suggested in the tacitly accepted commonplace that good religion and kingship thriving in unison is the bedrock of Islamic political theory.

The exhortation to strong political rule, one of the loci where incipient secularity resides, was not limited to politicians and courtiers, nor did the augmented standing of the *‘ulama’* (Muslim theologians and jurists) by the tenth century extinguish the debate. Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Islam’s preeminent medieval theologian, wrote on the relationship between kings and their subjects in unambiguous terms:

Everybody to whom God has given religion must therefore love and obey kings and recognize that their kingship is granted by God, and given by Him to whom He wills.

God’s favor is signaled in long rule, and the

unjust Sultan is ill-starred and will have no endurance, because the Prophet stated that ‘sovereignty endures even when there is unbelief, but will not endure when there is injustice.’ (al-Ghazālī 1964, 46)

Judgment of the king’s probity belongs to God alone, but at the same time, kings are measured by their policies and practices.

Medieval Muslim intellectuals preach a strict divide between religion and politics – in religion’s favor, of course – to demarcate the purview of legitimate

political rule. In the anonymous *Tuhfat al-muluk dar adab* (“A Gift to Kings in Civility”), penned sometime between the early thirteenth and the latter part of the fourteenth century, Malikshah the Saljuq sultan (r. 1073-92) is chided for interfering in religious affairs by the aforementioned Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni. In one anecdote, the sultan arrives in Nishapur when 29 days have passed in the month of Ramadan. His courtiers tell him that the crescent of the new moon is visible and therefore ‘*id al-fitr*’ (celebrations that mark the end of the fasting month of Ramadan) should be celebrated the next day. Word spread quickly to Imam al-Haramayn, who did not hesitate to announce that he would nevertheless keep his fast, as should his followers. Against the mischievous advice of his courtiers who advocated a swift rebuke, Malikshah asked that the theologian be summoned with great respect. When brought into his presence, al-Juwayni told the sultan that all the sultan’s royal decrees (*firman*) are obligatory on his subjects. But that which belongs to the realm of religious order (fatwa) is incumbent on all sultans. The *shari‘a*, al-Juwayni claimed, stipulates parity between the *firman* of the sultans and the fatwa of the ‘*ulama*,’ and fasting clearly belongs to the realm of the latter. Malikshah sent the cleric home fully convinced of his righteousness (Anonymous 1938, 15-17). The way the anecdote is carefully related not only distinguishes the two spheres of divine and secular but also stresses that such a clear division stops the chaos which ensues when decision making is left on the basis of hearsay to an indeterminate and changing group of people keen to settle scores.

Just as the illustration of Edward IV juxtaposes the nobility with the clergy, Nizam al-Mulk, al-Ghazali and many others twin religion with kingship and, against the consensus of modern scholarship, render the former dependent on the latter. The intricate twinning of kingship and religion is echoed as well in medieval mirrors from distant origins, which further dispels facile contextualization.

In an anonymous thirteenth-century Norse mirror for princes,⁵ the king advises his son on that which unites and separates God’s kingdoms on earth:

God has established two houses upon earth, each chosen for a definite service. The one is the church; in fact we may give this name to both, if we like, for the word church means the same as judgment hall, because there the people meet and assemble. These two houses are the halls of God, and He has appointed two men to keep watch over them. In one of these halls He has placed His table, and this is called the house of bread; for there God’s people gather to receive spiritual food. But in the other hall He has placed His holy judgment seat and there the people assemble to hear the interpretation of God’s holy verdicts. And God has appointed two keepers to guard these houses: the one is the king, the other the bishop [...] both these halls are God’s houses and both king and bishop the servants of God and keepers of these houses; but they do not own them. (Anonymous 1917, 358-64)

⁵ For more on the politics of religion in this text, see Bragge 1987, 11-20, 210-8.

Religion and kingship are twinned in this thirteenth-century text to demarcate their differing function and purview, and as always, to tame religion, but not before they are twinned as God's possession and in equal measure, accountable to His will. The twinning of religion and kingship as God's twin halls, in the context of an erring high priest, Abiathar, who had wrongfully deposed Solomon before God had so decreed and was therefore punished when Solomon rightfully deposed him, posits Solomon as the executor of God's judgment. King and bishop are equal servants of God, an ideological stance firmly cast in religious language that promotes secular authority's independence from religion.

Arguing from the other side presumably, the hugely influential Augustinian Giles of Rome (d. 1316), archbishop of Bourges appointed by Pope Boniface VIII (d. 1303), twinned the temporal sword with the ecclesiastical one, to argue that although "the earthly power is appointed not only through the ecclesiastical by special divine command, but actually by the ecclesiastical," and that the Church has both swords, "she does not have the right to wield both swords," and not just because an intermediary is necessary between "the ecclesiastical power and the judgment of blood," but because "the material and inferior sword is jointed to the spiritual and superior sword, and that by these two swords the whole people is fittingly ruled, and consequently, that whole people is adorned and ornamented" (Giles of Rome 2004, 246-67). In this passage and elsewhere,⁶ Giles asserts the superiority of royal power by recourse to religious metaphors.

Should the twinning of religion and kingship, deployed differently on different occasions, not be considered a global political concept, operational in multiple, concurrent but non-synchronous contexts, *none* of which are original to it? Reading opposites as an interpretive strategy was a common feature of political discourse in the medieval Islamic and Christian worlds.⁷ The semiotic valences of paired contraries invite interpretation and unravel literal readings. The twinning of religion and kingship is neither a remnant from pre-Islamic Iran, nor is it a quintessentially Islamic concept. In abundant supply in pre-modern discourse everywhere, it signifies an opening, a strategy for thinking about politics.

Far from a timeless ideal that guarantees the hold of religion over public life throughout the ages, the fraternity of religion and state is properly understood only with due attention to its performative regard. It is no coincidence that the

⁶ For other instances where Giles uses the Aristotelian outlook as a form of rhetorical device, see Kempshall 2007, and Lachaud 2014.

⁷ I have in mind Nicholas of Cusa's (d. 1464) notion of *coincidentia oppositorum* and its heuristic significance; see Nicholas of Cusa 1985, I: 4, 22; and for a fuller account of the twinning of religion and kingship and the pairing of contraries as political language, see Yavari 2014, 113-42.

precept is frequently invoked in writings from the eleventh century, when a new political order supplanted that of the past in the Islamic world, ushering in an era of sultanic rule, to use Stefan Leder's term (Leder 2015, 97-98).⁸ A defanged caliphate in Baghdad, with neither power nor authority, coexisted with a succession of dynastic houses – often short-lived – in control of various parts of the caliphate. It would be a mistake to assume that the political and scholarly elites of the era were merely sleepwalking into a new world. The intellectual record preserves a fierce debate among competing conceptions of sovereignty and good rule, often linked to varying theologies of what was conceived as “true Islam.”⁹

The fabled al-Ghazali was at the forefront of those debates. To resolve the crisis and to push back against attempts to resuscitate the caliphate with a vapid notion of Islamic legitimacy that had no historical or textual roots, al-Ghazali advocated an Islamic state that recognized parity between caliphal and non-caliphal rule. Political authority belonged to the sultan – on account of his might and strength (*shawka*) – and was wholly unmediated. The caliphs, on the other hand, commanded supreme religious authority, for the *law* (*shari'a*) could not be upheld without them (Campanini 2011, 234-7; Glassen 1981, 63-84). He explicitly enjoined the caliph not to intervene in the sultan's sphere (Crone 2004, 237-49). Al-Ghazali's diminished caliphate, a largely religious and apolitical presence, stemmed from his conviction that the caliphate of the early ninth century could not be restored but, at the same time, that no polity could thrive without a shared ideology. The 'Abbasid caliphate was to be kept alive, but not as a bastion of fanaticism enthralled by Hanbali (a literalist school of Sunni jurisprudence) rabble-rousers itching to take to the streets to silence opponents. In Baghdad, where the 'Abbasids still enjoyed a measure of control over political life after the tenth century, riots instigated by Hanbalis against Shi'is (the second main branch of Islam best explained as a conceptual antipode to the Sunni) as well as other Sunnis such as the Mu'tazilis (a rationalist school of Islamic theology) or Ash'aris (a centrist theological school of Sunni Islam) were frequent.¹⁰ More often than not, the medieval histories criticized the 'Abbasid caliphs for abetting the riots. By recognizing the autochtho-

⁸ The de facto sultanic model that prevailed from the tenth century is distinct from the secular/sacred dual leadership model adopted by the 'Alid opposition in the seventh and eighth centuries, see Sharon 1983, 228.

⁹ The resonances with European political thought in a later period are instructive. Brent Nongbri argues that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as intra-Christian violence over the question of the “true religion” was growing, political theorists, such as Jean Bodin and John Locke, began to conceive of religion as a distinct, privatized sphere of activity that should support and not disturb the affairs of the newly-emerging nation states that redefined the European political landscape; Nongbri 2013, 9-10.

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of Hanbali politics in the eleventh century, see Allard 1960; Cook 2005, 116-28; and for factional strife in eastern Iran in this period, see Bulliet 1972, 28-46.

nous sovereignty of non-caliphal rule, al-Ghazali sought to deprive the ‘Abbasids of their longstanding privilege as apportioners of Islamic legitimacy and orthodoxy, and thus curtail their ability to instigate religious strife.

In the annals of medieval political thought, al-Ghazali is on record – as we have seen – for advocating strong kingship and sovereign local rule, hardly a reactionary, or even a proto-*salafī* (an ideology that selectively idealizes aspects of early Islamic practice) position. And in his theological writings, he emphasized reconciliation and restraint against anathematizing his opponents (Van Ess 2006, 39-44). Yet he is consistently taken to task in modern scholarship for his role in the decline of philosophy in the Islamic world and for incremental ossification of political thought. The accusation was voiced by Ernest Renan in the late nineteenth century (Renan 1883) and reiterated in academic discourse in the early twentieth century with the publication of de Boer’s *History of Philosophy in Islam* (De Boer 1903, 154-72). De Boer ended his presentation with Averroes who died in 1198. From then on, he claimed, students of philosophy in the Islamic world were mostly epitomists – merely engaged in glossing on early works without themselves contributing original thoughts (Griffel 2009, 4; Griffel 2016b vii-xv; Rudolph 2016, 32-53). That accusation is no longer regnant, thanks to powerful critiques by Peter Gran, Frank Griffel, Reinhard Schulze, and others (Peters 1990; Gran 1996; Schulze 2000, 2016; Hofheinz 2018; Salvatore, Tottoli, and Rahimi 2018), but not yet fully disavowed.¹¹

Much of the criticism rests on al-Ghazali’s famous refutation of the philosophers, *Tahafut al-falasifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) (Ghazālī 1997). In contrast to Avicenna (d. 1037) and his disciples who claimed that their theological views agreed with those of the theologians, al-Ghazali held that true knowledge could only be attained as a gift from God by revelation. He was also well aware that Sufi leaders too professed a claim to privileged knowledge of the divine, though not by rational thought, but through mystical intuition (Madelung 2015, 27, Griffel 2016c).¹²

The past decade has seen several attempts at exonerating al-Ghazali from blame for the apparent decline of philosophy in the Islamic world. Wilferd Madelung (Madelung 2015) and Massimo Campanini (Campanini 2011) have

¹¹ Jonathan Berkey wrote in 2003 that between the fifth/eleventh and ninth/fifteenth centuries, the rational sciences such as philosophy and logic tended to become marginalized from what he calls the “Sunni intellectual mainstream,” although he adds, “there is nothing inherently anti-rational about Islam” (Berkey 2003, 229-30).

¹² Al-Ghazali criticizes 20 teachings of the Muslim philosophers. According to Madelung, three of those mark a departure from Islam: 1) The view that the word has no beginning in the past and is not created in time, 2) the view that God’s knowledge includes only classes of beings (universals) and does not extend to individual beings and their circumstances (particulars), and finally, 3) that after death the souls of humans will never again return to their bodies.

written on al-Ghazali's theoretical depth, and Frank Griffel (Griffel 2009, 2016, 2016b) and others point to his many outlier positions on commonly held Ash'ari tenets. Other scholars, including Khaled El-Rouayheb, have echoed Henry Corbin and many Iranian scholars to argue that the study of philosophy and logic remained very much alive in the Islamic east, and particularly in Iran (Algar 1980, Landolt 1999, El-Rouayheb 2010, 133-56, 228-59; Qummī 2017).

There is yet another angle to al-Ghazali's vindication that merits further scrutiny. A cursory look at medieval Christian political thought will reveal that in divorcing philosophy from religion, al-Ghazali in many ways went along the same road as William of Ockham (d. 1347) and Marsilius of Padua (d. 1342), both considered in the Christian political tradition as iconoclasts who helped destroy the hierocratic edifice upheld by the papacy. Like al-Ghazali, Ockham's theology was animated by political controversies, in his case the schism that plagued the Franciscan order and the papacy in the early fourteenth century (Shogimen 2007, 1-35).¹³ Ockham maintained that absolutely nothing could be proved about God through natural reason. The existence of God is an object of faith, not of demonstration. It is, Ockham said, indeed probable that there is a God, that He has endowed man with a soul, and that this soul is an incorporeal and immortal substance, but none of this can be shown in philosophy, and so, in spite of what the theologians might say, it cannot be demonstrated in theology. In short, it cannot be demonstrated at all. God's existence is a matter of faith alone. Ockham's views that belief in God is a matter of faith rather than knowledge, and that neither theology nor philosophy can prove God's existence, and finally that it is the will of God rather than an innate essence which determines which objects are good (Friedman 2012; Pelletier 2013, 206-70), resonate with al-Ghazali's position.

Ockham's views have been read in the history of Christian political thought as having dealt a devastating blow to the hierocratic idea of the Ecclesia and the unity of the Christian body politic. It destroyed "the conception that political society was a Church, and substituted for this idea a purely naturalistic *societas humana*" (Wilks 1964, 90). The end for which mankind exists, and the way in which human society shall be organized, must be established by earthly criteria, according to Ockham; as it was to al-Ghazali:

Although we say that God may do to His subjects as He wills, and that the observance of their good reason is not incumbent upon Him, we do not deny that reason indicates what is advantageous and disadvantageous and warns against ruin and urges the attraction of what is of benefit. Nor do we deny that the messengers were sent for the good of creation in religion and world matters as

¹³ As in the case of al-Ghazali, modern scholarship on Ockham is sharply divided: some see Ockham as an innovative destroyer of the Church and defender of Empire; some as a traditional constitutional liberal; and others as an apolitical theologian; see Shogimen 2007, 10; Nederman 2008; Pelletier 2013, 209-10.

a bounty from God, not as a duty obligated upon Him. (Al-Ghazali 1971, 162-3)¹⁴

Al-Ghazali is advocating for a religion conducive to the maintenance of public peace. His notion of “true Islam” is one that is in the service of government, what may be termed as secularity. That same objective animated the Reformation in Europe, as Armando Salvatore has demonstrated, with secularity’s roots in this instance found in “several innovative systematizations by Dominican and Franciscan scholars during the Axial Renaissance” (Salvatore 2005, 418-19; Bejan 2017). Secularity, he goes on to argue, is a Euro-Islamic, or perhaps more precisely, an Islamo-Christian concept. Again, the point here is not to suggest a connectedness between the practice and history of secularity as it developed in the Islamic world and in Europe, but rather to emphasize a concurrent and non-synchronous development.

The unbridgeable gap between the two divergent readings of strikingly similar views – one prevailing in the study of Islamic political thought that points to al-Ghazali as a defender of orthodoxy against innovation and philosophy, and the second prevalent in the history of political thought in medieval Christianity that celebrates Ockham’s role in undermining the united Christian body politic espoused by the papacy, and paving the way for bifurcating the secular from the spiritual in late medieval Christianity – can be explained by recalling several of the points made earlier regarding the identification of a proper context that must precede a historical intellectual inquiry.

In his “On the Elusiveness of Context,” Takashi Shogimen asks: How can we decide the pertinent context in which a given object of historical study should be examined? His response is that one cannot embark on a historical inquiry by simply coming up with a certain context, as Quentin Skinner suggests, the relevance of which one presumes. To a large extent, identifying a relevant context is logically antecedent to the inquiry – for it is only in the purview of its own context that the illocutionary force of a narrative assumes singularity and invites further interrogation. Therefore, Shogimen asserts, a genuinely historical inquiry begins by forming a question about why an author makes a certain set of remarks in a given text because the remarks defy “the current theory” (Shogimen 2016, 251), i.e., what was considered conventional in its context. The puzzling fact that points to a new context appropriate for the study of Islamic political thought is – as I hope to have shown – the radically different readings of similar sets of remarks by Ockham and by al-Ghazali. Put differently, it is impossible to read the politics in al-Ghazali’s thought without due consideration of the ideological debates and the political controversies that animated them. Crucially, it is the political climate, rather than doctrinal innovation, that forges al-Ghazali’s outstanding stature (and, I suspect, Ockham’s

¹⁴ The passage is cited from El-Shamsy 2016, 91-2.

as well). On many issues of cosmology, his positions dovetailed Avicenna's (Griffel 2016) and, though he was one of the first to adopt the idea that the common good was an important objective of Muslim jurisprudence, he was by no means the sole pioneer.

Purveyance of the common good was a staple of European political debates in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Kempshall 1999; Shogimen 2018) – as well as those in the Islamic world in the eleventh and twelfth. As was secularity as process – and secular politics when disambiguated into concern for the common good, the separation of religion from politics and religion from philosophy. If the practice of politics in the Christian world diverged from the Islamic model beginning roughly in the fifteenth century, might this not necessitate a more carefully calibrated reading of the historiographical register?¹⁵ The presentism in evidence in the historiography of political thought in the Islamic world starts not in the Islamic world itself, but in the American and, to a lesser extent, the European academy.¹⁶ It stems, at least in part, from a systematic undermining of the practical regard of political thought – a *sine qua non* of methodologically rigorous historical inquiry. Where is the political it hopes to address,¹⁷ or the debate that may serve as its context, or the puzzling fact that can guide us to its pertinent context? What politics, in short, does Western academic writing on Islam intend to transform?

The dissonance in question is by no means limited to scholarship on the Islamic world. In a roundtable on “Presentism” published in *Past and Present*, Rana Mitter points to a strikingly different accommodation of the pre-Communist past in Chinese academic and popular histories when compared with the Western output. Since the mid-1980s, Mitter writes, a new understanding of China's experience during the Second World War has emerged in China, one that emphasizes continuity with its pre-revolutionary past “by implying a continuum between the actions of the Nationalist government and the Communist one” (Mitter 2017, 216). The revisionism is driven by China's objective to boost its moral claim against Japan and Taiwan, present-day rivals contending for hegemony, by making the case that its demands were ignored in the post-war settlements and, therefore, merit serious consideration. The nationalization of the past cultivated by China's officialdom is also embraced by Chi-

¹⁵ The prevalence and reach of the “great divergence” hypothesis in explaining Europe's rise to prominence has been questioned in recent scholarship; Humfress 2014, 16–29.

¹⁶ Irfan Ahmad explores a cognate debate in the discipline of anthropology; Ahmad 2018.

¹⁷ In a similar vein, Maurizio Viroli has argued that the true significance of the conclusion in Machiavelli's *The Prince* is only evident when understood as the author's intervention in political debates in fifteenth-century Italy, rather than a larger Christian or European context, see Viroli 2013, 113–48. And Yasir Yilmaz has lamented the “Ottoman” frame for currents and trends within a political unit spread across three continents. An argument for the emergence of modern and secular tendencies in the seventeenth-century Ottoman empire, for example, would have to apply to Egypt, Anatolia, and the Balkans; see Yilmaz 2017, 177.

nese society. In the West, however, although the turn has gained traction in academic circles, it is largely absent from the public sphere, which still remains enthralled by presentism.

Towards the end of his review of Skinner's contributions to meaning and method in the history of political thought, J. G. A. Pocock suggests that history, that is all written historiography which may be understood as conservative or liberal in its intention and effect, can be written "only in political societies with the capacity to manage their history in the present and, as a necessary accompaniment, to review and renew it in the perceived past." He adds:

Our world is divided, in short, into those who claim to have, to know, to write, and to change histories of their own making, and those who say that this is not their situation and they doubt how far it is that of those who claim it. If 'history' in the former sense cannot be imposed on those who do not have it, they cannot demand its abnegation by those who have grounds for claiming it. (Pocock 2004, 549-50)

Pocock's claim is, one hopes, an outlier position in current debates on global thought. But perhaps acknowledging the present-day *and* presentist context of all histories of political thought, most of which are artifices of the very same nexus of power and ideology that is the supposed purview of intellectual history, will make it possible to challenge Pocock's characterization and overcome the barriers that have marginalized the study of non-Western political thought.

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